

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

07 December 2015

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Nunn, C. and McMichael, C. and Gifford, S.M. and Correa-Velez, I. (2014) 'I came to this country for a better life' : factors mediating employment trajectories among young people who migrated to Australia as refugees during adolescence.', *Journal of youth studies.*, 17 (9). pp. 1205-1220.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.901496>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in *Journal of Youth Studies* on 31/03/2014, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13676261.2014.901496>.

### Additional information:

---

### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

*Caitlin Nunn, Celia McMichael, Sandra M. Gifford & Ignacio Correa-Velez (2014) 'I came to this country for a better life': factors mediating employment trajectories among young people who migrated to Australia as refugees during adolescence, Journal of Youth Studies, 17:9, 1205-1220, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2014.901496*

## **'I came to this country for a better life': Factors mediating employment trajectories among young people who migrated to Australia as refugees during adolescence**

Caitlin Nunn, Celia McMichael, Sandra M. Gifford and Ignacio Correa-Velez

Located at the intersection of two vulnerable groups in the contemporary labour market, young people who migrate as refugees during adolescence face a unique constellation of opportunities and challenges that shape their employment trajectories. Yet the tendency for research to focus on the early years of refugee settlement means that we have an inadequate understanding the factors that mediate their employment decisions, experiences and outcomes. Based on interviews with 51 young people, this article explores how aspirations, responsibilities, family, education and networks are understood to influence the employment trajectories of adolescent refugee migrants. While this article draws attention to the complex and dynamic range of challenges and constraints that these young people negotiate in the pursuit of satisfying and sustainable employment, what also emerges is an optimistic and determined cohort who, even as they at times unsuccessfully prepare for and navigate the labour market, maintain high hopes for a better life.

**Keywords:** employment; youth; refugee; settlement; transition

## Introduction

Work plays a central role not only in people's economic survival, but also in matters of identity, wellbeing and social participation (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; Devadason 2006; Jamrozik 2005). The nature and structure of employment in advanced economies such as Australia has, however, altered significantly in recent decades, including through the increased casualization of the workforce, a decline in the manufacturing sector, and an emphasis on further education (Anlezark 2011b; Furlong 2009; MacDonald et al. 2005; te Riele 2004). This dynamic context provides a range of opportunities and challenges for those seeking employment. Two groups who have received significant research attention in this area are young people (c.f. MacDonald 2011; te Riele 2004) and refugee migrants (c.f. Willott and Stevenson 2013; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). This attention has emerged in response to the particular vulnerabilities of these groups in entering and negotiating the contemporary labour market. Located at the intersection of these two cohorts, refugees who migrate during adolescence face a unique constellation of employment opportunities and challenges that both align with and diverge from those of adult refugee migrants and young people more generally. Yet in contrast to these groups, the experiences of adolescent refugee migrants have received little academic attention (Refugee Council of Australia 2010; Wilkinson 2008).

It is widely recognised that refugees who migrate during adolescence face a distinct set of challenges in settling into the host society (CMYI 2006). These challenges frequently include disrupted education pre-migration and barriers to educational success post-migration; poor health and wellbeing as a consequence of pre- and post-migration experiences; significant family responsibilities including caring for siblings, assisting parents, and contributing economically to the household; and experiences of structural and interpersonal discrimination in the host society (CMYI 2006; Coventry et al. 2002). While such challenges are likely to have profound implications for employment, research on this group to date has focused overwhelmingly on the early years of settlement, and particularly on education (Gifford 2013; c.f. Matthews 2008; Wilkinson 2002). Thus, while adolescent refugee migrants often experience unemployment at

higher levels than other young people (Boese and Scutella 2006), we have an inadequate understanding of the factors that mediate their employment decisions, experiences and outcomes (Wilkinson 2008; Stevenson and Willott 2007).

As young people, they are likely to share with their non-refugee-background peers the experience of complex, non-linear transitions from school to work, an increased emphasis on tertiary education, and insecure work and/or underemployment (Anlezark 2011b; Pech, McNevin, and Nelms 2009; Evans 2007; te Riele 2004). In addition, they are likely to encounter some of the employment barriers faced by adult refugee migrants, including low literacy, limited social networks, and insufficient access to support and information (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010; Torezani, Colic-Peisker, and Fozdar 2008).

In the context of these complex intersections of refugee and youth experiences, this article explores how young people who migrated as refugees during adolescence understand and narrate their employment trajectories. Based on in-depth interviews, it provides accounts of five key factors identified by participants as mediating their desire and ability to gain employment: aspirations, responsibilities, family, education, and networks. Participants provide diverse accounts that illustrate how these factors variously support or inhibit employment trajectories, and how they differently coalesce to mediate outcomes. While these accounts draw attention to the vulnerability of adolescent refugee migrants in the labour market and the challenges they encounter in the pursuit of satisfying and sustainable employment, they also highlight a range of supportive factors and personal strengths. Overwhelmingly, what emerges is an optimistic and determined cohort of young people who, even as they, at times unsuccessfully, navigate the complex transition into employment, maintain high hopes for a better life.

### ***Overview of study and participants***

This article draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with fifty-one young adults aged between 18 and 27 years. These young people migrated as refugees during adolescence and have now resided in Australia for between six and nine years. Interviews were conducted in 2012-13 as part of a follow-up to the Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth (2004-2008), a mixed-method longitudinal study of the settlement of young people from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia.

Good Starts aimed to identify and describe the factors that assist adolescent refugee migrants in settling into their new country. 120 participants aged between 11 and 19 years who had been in the country for less than two years were initially recruited to the study from three English Language Schools across Melbourne, and were followed annually over a four-year period. Participants' regions of origin reflected the main regions of origin of refugee arrivals at the time (Gifford et al. 2007). The 2012-3 follow-up study provided an opportunity to learn about participants' longer-term experiences of settlement and transitions into adulthood. The 51 young people who were located to participate in the follow-up study comprise 25 females and 26 males, originating from Africa (65%), the Middle East (31%), and Eastern Europe (4%), and are broadly representative of participants in the original cohort.

Employment was addressed in interviews as one of several spheres of experience considered central to the settlement process (Ager and Strang 2004). Interviews were analysed thematically, with the themes addressed in this article emerging as among the most common factors identified by participants as mediating their employment trajectories. While, as a number of studies of youth transitions have demonstrated, young people have varying levels of awareness of the range of factors – structural, social, and biographical – that impact them (Furlong 2009; Devadason 2007, 2006), the accounts discussed in this article provide important insights into the ways in which employment decisions, experiences and outcomes are understood and experienced by adolescent refugee migrants themselves.

At the time of interviews, participants were engaged in various forms of linear and non-linear transition between education and employment. 23 had

some level of employment, with 19 working as their primary pursuit – though often in casual or part-time roles. Of those who were working, six were simultaneously undertaking work-related study or training, while four were working part-time while studying unrelated tertiary degrees. An additional 14 participants were not employed but were undertaking further education: 11 attending university full-time and the remainder completing part-time certificate qualifications. Six interviewees were primarily caring for a child, and one for a parent, though often simultaneously job-seeking or undertaking a certificate course. The remaining seven participants were not engaged in education, employment or caring, though the majority were actively job seeking. This overview of participants' current pursuits highlights the complexity of youth transitions, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Circelli and Oliver 2012; CMY 2008; MacDonald et al. 2005; te Riele 2004).

### **Mediating Factors for Employment Trajectories**

As the brief summary above indicates, there is no typical employment trajectory for young people who migrate as refugees during adolescence. Nonetheless, analysis of interview data did highlight a constellation of factors that were widely understood to affect employment decisions and possibilities, albeit in different ways, combinations and intensities. Most common were aspirations to specific careers, or to a more generalized idea of 'a good life'; financial responsibilities to family members in Australia and overseas; the practical and psychosocial support of – but also pressure exerted by – family members, and a concomitant desire among some young people to honour their family's sacrifices; the bonding and bridging capital of personal networks; and literacy and pre-and post-migration educational opportunities. Other factors identified by multiple participants, but not addressed in this article include government programs, health and wellbeing, and experiences of implicit or explicit discrimination. Thus while the five factors addressed below were the most dominant in participants' accounts, they are illustrative rather than constitutive of the experiences of adolescent refugee migrants more generally. Moreover, while each factor is addressed separately, it is important to

acknowledge that they all intersect to varying degrees to produce both enabling and limiting conditions for satisfying and sustainable employment.

### ***Aspirations***

People with refugee backgrounds, and adolescent migrants in particular, have high employment aspirations in early settlement, often including a desire to pursue tertiary education and to seek professional careers (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; Circelli and Oliver 2012; Stevenson and Willott 2007). Yet many young people face significant barriers to pursuing these aspirations, including low literacy and/or educational attainment, low expectations by, and a lack of support from, schools and services, and a lack of knowledge of educational and employment structures and pathways (Circelli and Oliver 2012; Hatoss, O'Neill, and Eacersall 2012; Stevenson and Willott 2007). As with other disadvantaged young people (c.f. Devadason 2007), adolescent refugee migrants may perceive these barriers as insurmountable or as motivational. Aspirations cannot, therefore, be understood in and of themselves to facilitate employment. They do, however, play an important role in mediating decisions about, and motivation to pursue, employment trajectories.

Participants in this study expressed aspirations that ranged from a generalised hope to achieve a better quality of life to explicit career goals, and which included a spectrum of desired outcomes, from obtaining any form of secure employment to entering a tertiary-qualified profession. These aspirations were central to many people's accounts of how they have maintained their motivation to pursue education and employment despite encountering setbacks. Indeed, notwithstanding the diversity in aspirations and success in pursuing them, interviewees' accounts of future hopes and plans almost universally support the claim by Coventry et al. (2002, 45) that, '[d]espite the barriers in their pathways to employment, most young refugees seem to retain high hopes and expectations of a bright future'.

In pursuing employment or advancement, a common aspiration was to achieve a 'good' or 'better' life, either in comparison to current circumstances or

to members of local or ethnic communities. For Sammy, a 21 year-old Oromo (Ethiopian) young man, aspirations for a good life have sustained him on an elongated educational pathway toward his desired career. Initially progressing well in mainstream secondary education, Sammy became disengaged with learning, and in his final two years of schooling he was directed into the vocational Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) program, rather than the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), through which access to tertiary education is determined. When he subsequently decided to pursue a university education in order to qualify for his desired career in financial planning, he was required to undertake several interim courses in order to gain admittance. Asked what kept him motivated through these additional years of education, he said:

I don't wanna be like the lowest people around me. Like for example, people who is jobless or who are looking job, just drug use. I don't wanna be like that. I wanna have a good quality life. I wanna be like normal, like others, you know.

For 21 year-old Sudanese woman, Nyrury, the pursuit of higher education and a career is similarly framed in relation to a 'better life', but in her case it is also informed by what she observes in her ethnic community:

I came to this country for a better life, and I see some of my community people who don't have that qualification. They're...working, so they're having an income, but yet they're not happy with what they're doing. So I don't want that. I want more.

Even where employment goals are achieved, many people continue to aspire to advance. 25 year-old Afghan male, Arif, has already exceeded his own expectations. Coming to Australia aged 16 years and with little prior education, he is now training to become a supervisor in a manufacturing company. He stresses the need to improve oneself, and while acknowledging how far he has come already, said 'I want to be pushing myself a lot more higher'. 'Once I get this position', he stated, 'then I will go for more improvement'.

While most participants arrived in Australia with high career aspirations, many, in encountering barriers or setbacks, reoriented or recalibrated their goals, identifying new aspirations or new pathways or timelines for achieving



existing ones. In a few cases, however, young people successfully pursued their aspirations and are on track to achieve their desired careers. One such person is 20 year-old Afghan man, Assadullah. From arrival in Australia as a 12 year-old, Assadullah expressed a consistent desire to become a pilot. Having undertaken some schooling in Pakistan, he embraced the opportunity to further his education in Australia, with strong encouragement from his family. Assadullah is currently completing a bachelor of aviation, and already holds a pilot's license. He confidently aspires to pilot a commercial airplane:

I'm not gonna give up. Never. 'Cause I know what I want to do. And I know there are ways. And I can't imagine myself doing anything else. There's literally nothing I would want to do except for this. So I'll keep looking and hunting until I have something.

Assadullah's ability to translate this aspiration into an achievable goal is in part a product of factors such as his pre-arrival education, his young age at migration, and his supportive family. Nonetheless, the motivational impact of the aspiration itself should not be underestimated. Indeed, Assadullah compared himself to his brother who, two years his senior, has experienced the same opportunities, but in the absence of a clear goal is still struggling to identify a career path.

### ***Responsibilities***

While many adolescent refugee migrants arrive with aspirations for occupational success, their pursuit must be balanced against financial responsibilities to family members in Australia and abroad (Fozdar and Hartley 2013; Circelli and Oliver 2012; CMYI 2006). Immediate needs often take precedence over long-term aspirations, at times leading young people to truncate their education, prioritise work over study, take on multiple jobs, or accept undesirable employment. Similarly, the responsibilities of early parenthood, especially where unplanned, can necessitate re-evaluation of aspirations and, at least in the short-term, adversely affect employment outcomes for young mothers, and sometimes fathers (McMichael 2013; Pech, McNevin, and Nelms 2009).

Remitting money to family members overseas is a common practice among refugee migrants generally (Fozdar and Hartley 2013; Lindley 2009), with adolescent migrants frequently contributing part of their income to this practice (CMYI 2006). Of the 23 participants in this study who earned an income, 90% of the young women and 54% of the men said some or most of their income went to support family overseas. There is, however, a sharp difference between those who contribute when and as they can, and those who experience it as a core responsibility. In particular, those young people who migrate without close family members often face the significant responsibility of financially supporting parents or siblings left behind in the country or region of origin. Juba, a 26 year-old Sudanese man who migrated to Australia with his uncle when he was 17 found himself in this situation:

I left my family. They need money back home. So they want something from me, and I know like I do everything, 'cause I'm the older, come here.

With little financial support from his uncle, Juba was unable to fund his education and remit money to his family from his government payments. This led him to drop out of secondary school and take a job in a factory.

In contrast, for those who prioritise their education while family members abroad are in financial need, feelings of guilt can ensue. Arriving with her brother and his wife at the age of 13, Nyrury was supported to complete her secondary school education and is currently undertaking a bachelor degree in public health. While Nyrury hopes that this will lead to a good career, in the short term it leaves her unable to support her family in Sudan: 'My main focus is to help my mother and my sibling back home, which I'm not doing much at the moment'.

In addition to remitting money overseas, many young people make a significant financial contribution to their family household in Australia, especially where other members of the family are unemployed (CMYI 2006). This includes paying bills, purchasing food and household items, and contributing to renting or purchasing a house. As is the case with remittances,

many contribute within their existing means, including government payments, while others seek employment primarily for this purpose.

Dlovan, a 22 year-old Iraqi Chaldean man, arrived in Australia with his family when he was 15. His father is on a disability pension and his mother receives a government allowance to care for him. Despite this, only a few years post-migration the family purchased a house. Dlovan explained that this was achieved through 'three brothers working all the time... My dad knew that we could do something, and so we had to'. Dlovan's contribution began during secondary school when he was employed in a restaurant, first as a dishwasher and then as cook, working three nights and all weekend. Asked how this work schedule affected his studies, he responded: 'A lot. I had to do all my assignments and everything at school 'cause I couldn't have time at home'. Initially gaining entry into a TAFE<sup>i</sup> course, Dlovan found studying too difficult and dropped out after a year. He now continues to cook part-time while also undertaking a mechanics apprenticeship, still contributing part of his income to his family.

Parenting, and particularly single and teen parenting, also had an impact on some participants' decisions and opportunities around education and employment, as it does for young parents more generally (Pech, McNevin, and Nelms 2009; Devadason 2007). Mothers – and a smaller number of fathers – initially gave up education in order to care for or support young children, thereby impeding their occupational pursuits. While a number of young women have subsequently re-engaged with education or found employment, this is mediated by childcare needs and cultural norms.

Elizabeth, a 24 year-old Dinka (Sudanese) woman, fell pregnant during her final year of secondary school and did not complete. Her subsequent attempts at returning to education were initially unsuccessful:

I stay home with [my daughter] for four months and then took her to childcare and then go to TAFE...and do Certificate II Business Administration with English together. Then I did not quite finish that because every now and then I would take [my daughter], she get sick...

Then most of the time I take off from school so I did not make it, I did not get a certificate for that.

More recently, however, with the support of her mother, she has been able to return to study certificates in both business and children's services, and to work part-time in an African food store.

Beyond the immediate disruption to education or employment, parenthood can also lead to a reorientation of employment aspirations. This was the case for 23 year-old Dinka woman, Nyagony. During her final year of secondary school she fell pregnant with her first child, subsequently marrying the father and having a second child. She has obtained a certificate-level qualification in children's services and is now employed in family day care: a job that allows her to keep her young children with her while at work. Asked if there is anything about her life in Australia with which she is disappointed, she responded:

That I didn't get to accomplish what I want, like going to school. But I'm still going to school. It's not a choice of what I wanna do now. It's what I can work with and get money out of it and look after kids.'

Thus while parenthood disrupted Nyagony's educational and occupational aspirations, it did not end them but rather reoriented them to more pragmatic ends. Her continued determination to achieve occupational mobility is reflected in her current pursuit of a diploma of children's services, which she is undertaking alongside her work and caring responsibilities.

## ***Family***

Beyond the impact of financial responsibilities, family structures and practices influence employment decisions and outcomes among adolescent refugee migrants in a number of ways. Factors such as whether family members are settled together or remain/become separated, the class and educational background of parents, and adult family members' understanding of local

education and employment contexts all play a role in mediating youth employment trajectories (Morgan and Idriss 2012; McMichael, Gifford, and Correa-Velez 2011; Semo 2011; Boese and Scutella 2006). Of particular importance for participants in this study was the provision of practical and psychosocial support, pressure by adult family members to succeed, and a desire to honour the sacrifices of family members. Each of these factors played a role in shaping aspirations, choosing pathways, and facilitating or constraining achievements in young people's lives.

A number of participants credit the support of their family as an enabling factor in their pursuit of educational and occupational outcomes. Sarah is a 22 year-old final year nursing student of Sudanese background. Asked what helped her to achieve educational success, she explained:

I just think because I have the family support...and community support and stuff. Not everybody have that kind of support. The more support you get the more you tend to keep pushing, 'cause you have people backing you up. But if you have no support and things get really difficult you just give up [on] yourself.

For some participants, family support has a practical dimension, such as being encouraged to study rather than seek employment. This was the case for 18 year-old Iraqi Chaldean Mariam:

I knew if I worked I would put my work as [an] important part of my life, and then my study will come second. And it was just gonna impact on my marks. And that's what my parents were like. They're like: "don't work. You don't need money. We're here... [W]hatever you want we're providing you with everything, so why would you work? Just concentrate on your schoolwork".

As is clear from the previous section, other participants including Juba and Dlovan did not experience this kind of support.

Yet the focus on education can also be experienced as pressure to pursue particular career outcomes or forms of success that are not always realistic given young people's educational backgrounds and linguistic abilities

(McMichael, Gifford, and Correa-Velez 2011; Stevenson and Willott 2007; Boese and Scutella 2006). Participants responded to such pressures in a range of ways. For Fikre, a 21 year old Tigrinyan (Ethiopian) man, the desire to follow his family's wishes proved a temporary deviation from his own aspiration to work in international business. Asked why he didn't transition directly from school into his preferred course, he responded:

I was confused a bit. ...'Cause my parents, my mum and my sister – especially my sister – she was pushing me more into engineering 'cause she know I was good at maths... I thought about it and actually I'm like, "I'll give it a go. If I like it I'll continue, if I don't I've still got time, it's just my first year".

After barely passing his first year of engineering, Fikre transferred into a business course, in which he feels he is succeeding.

In contrast to the pressure imposed on young people such as Fikre, a number of participants were motivated by their own desire to honour, through occupational success, the sacrifices made by family members in the migration process. This pursuit may be in part financial, but it is more frequently expressed as a way of eliciting pride.

While Nyrury feels guilty at being unable to support her family in Sudan, her pursuit of a career in public health is intended to honour her mother:

...before I came to Australia and started my journey at all, I wanted to be a doctor... And that [was] because the life that I led when I lived in Sudan: my mother used to work in Red Cross... And back then she was more focused in our education... she wanted to make sure that us – her daughters especially – she wanted us to finish, accomplish some sort of education in life... And plus my mother is a single mother so it's really hard. So because when I think of her and what she has done – like the sacrificing for her in terms of me being in this country was a big sacrificing for her. So when I just think about that I say to myself, "I can't let her down and I want to achieve what it is, no matter what it will take"

Nyrury's inability to support her mother financially in the short-term can thus be understood as a product of her commitment to the longer-term investment of pursuing a career that is of greater value.

21 year-old Iraqi Chaldean woman Leyla shares Nyrury's desire to honour a family member, though in more difficult circumstances. Leyla faced significant challenges in Australia, having had no schooling prior to migration and experiencing significant family conflict post-migration. After unsuccessfully attempting to undertake education in a number of fields, she was jolted into action when her father, who was living overseas, passed away:

I really wanted to get somewhere in my life and not sit there and do nothing or start courses and leave for no reason. I mean, I used to pay for those courses sometimes and not even attend one class... I think I was really depressed, that's the reason why I was like that. And yeah, when Dad passed away, I was like to myself, "That's it" you know, "life is telling you to get up and just start from wherever you can".

With this motivation, Leyla was able to complete her first certificate qualification. She now aspires to work as a nail technician.

## ***Networks***

Personal networks often play an important role in providing job seekers with information about and opportunities in the labour market (Torezani, Colic-Peisker, and Fozdar 2008). Yet for both refugee adults and disadvantaged young people, such networks have been identified as a double-edged sword (Semo 2011; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; MacDonald et al. 2005). While for recently arrived adult refugees 'strong ties' with family and ethnic community (or 'bonding social capital') can facilitate entry into the workforce, this most frequently takes the form of low status, low paid jobs in the secondary labour market (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). Similarly, disadvantaged youth are often constrained by the geographic and economic bounded-ness of their social networks and the limited opportunities they provide (MacDonald et al. 2005). For both groups, 'weak ties' with better

resourced and networked members of the wider community (or 'bridging capital') are limited, in turn limiting access to information, resources, and avenues for upward mobility (de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006).

For the participants in this study the picture is more mixed. Unlike adults from refugee backgrounds, their young age on arrival gained many access to the mainstream education sector: an important site for the development of bridging capital through access to teachers, non-refugee background peers, and school-based programs (Semo 2011). A range of recreational and needs-based services directed at refugee young people also facilitated engagement with members of the host society. Moreover, the increasing educational and occupational mobility of some young people from refugee backgrounds has created valuable networks for younger or less established peers, increasing the value of close ties. A number of participants have been able to gain advice and assistance through such networks. Nonetheless, like adult refugee migrants, young people have more frequently gained employment, advice or assistance through less mobile close ties within their ethnic communities. This is widely recognized by participants as a successful strategy for obtaining unskilled employment and utilised alongside government job-seeking services, internet searches and resume-dropping.

Participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the role of their networks in pursuing employment. As 21 year-old Sudanese-background Yosef observed: 'Once you know people, everything's easy'. 16 participants mentioned getting at least one job through their networks – primarily family members and friends, and less commonly, non-co-ethnic associates – either directly or by being made aware of available positions. Most jobs acquired in this way were in unskilled sectors including those such as manufacturing and cleaning in which high numbers of refugee-background workers are employed, as well as in youth employment sectors such as retail and fast food. Some participants have, in turn, provided assistance to their own networks, with at least two participants securing jobs for a younger sibling at their workplace.



One of the few participants to increase his employment status through bridging capital was 21 year-old Oromo man, Sammy. Sammy gained his security license and experienced insecure employment as a subcontractor before joining a company and working at parties, clubs and bars: work which, as Sammy and several other participants acknowledge, can be dangerous. During this period Sammy was also involved with community activities on the housing estate where he lives. The networks this provided access to facilitated his shift to safer and more secure employment:

I was working with this lady from [a government department] and she knew me. She used to come around the community...and she asked me "What do you do?" "I have a security license. I just want a good job". "Well okay, give me your resume and I'll apply for you at [a major security firm.]" And she applied...for me.

Of his new position he said:

Better pay, more secure. They [pay me] annual leave, all that, sick leave. Even though I was part-timer, yeah, they gave me a permanent part-time job.

In contrast, some of the most isolated young people in the cohort do not even have close ties through which to gain entry into low-status employment. This is true for 25 year-old Sudanese woman Aisha, who migrated without her family as an 18 year-old and is also a single parent. She is cynical about the politics that mediate job-seeking assistance in her community:

...my people, they don't take you directly – they first have to choose from his relative until, when he's done, if there is nobody at all that he need a job, and then after that maybe... Yeah, they don't directly go to somebody that is looking for a job, no. First I have to look for my – somebody close to me, until I full the place up. Who that is not close to me, to hell.

Yet Aisha has proven herself adept at engaging weak ties to obtain information and support, including assistance in the certificate course she is currently undertaking. This reflects a wider trend in participants' accounts: that

while jobs are more likely to be obtained through low-status networks, more upwardly mobile contacts are primarily utilised to provide information and support, including assistance in producing resumes and advice about career paths beyond youth/migrant employment niches. Such advice is often acquired from co-ethnic peers, revealing how adolescent refugee migrants not only utilise both strong and weak ties in navigating the labour market, but that their close ties are often more diverse in terms of educational and occupational mobility than those of adult refugee migrants.

### ***Education***

Education, including literacy in the language of the host society, is widely understood to be an important component of successful refugee settlement (Fozdar and Hartley 2013; CMYI 2006). Given the propensity of refugee migrants to enter unskilled employment, education does not necessarily mediate the ability to find a job, but it has been found to affect the status of employment obtained (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010). Similarly, research on young people has highlighted the benefits of secondary school completion for labour market inclusion and increased employment status (Anlezark 2011a; Boese and Scutella 2006). Yet despite high rates of education participation (Hugo 2011; Khoo and Birrell 2002) and aspirations for further education (Hatoss, O'Neill, and Eacersall 2012) among refugee background adolescents and young adults, variations in educational opportunities and experiences both pre-and post-migration lead to differing possibilities for success (Wilkinson 2008; CMYI 2006). Three elements of education that were identified by participants as affecting their employment trajectories were pre-migration education, English literacy, and programs supporting education pathways.

Young people migrate to settlement countries with a range of educational backgrounds, from no or minimal schooling to an almost uninterrupted transition from pre- to post-migration education (Boese and Scutella 2006). For those participants who had limited formal education prior to arrival, the barriers to educational success in Australia are significant, with repercussions for

occupational trajectories. Afghan man, Arif, arrived in Australia as a 16-year-old. Due to the situation in Afghanistan, and then his need to work to support his family once they fled to Iran, Arif had been out of education for ten years prior to migration. He had hoped that resettlement would allow him to re-engage with schooling: 'When I come to Australia I was so excited. I'm the one that can do study, I'm free, I can do study now'. Placed into year ten, he soon found, however, that the gap in his education made secondary school too difficult. Leaving school, he undertook a certificate in mechanics, but when he sought an apprenticeship he found potential employers viewed his limited English literacy as an impediment. Unable to secure an apprenticeship and in need of an income, he sought unskilled employment in the manufacturing sector.

Similarly arriving in Australia with almost no prior schooling, Sudanese woman Aisha explained how her experience differed from those of her peers who had attended school pre-migration and highlighted the inability of the education system to support her:

It's me, it's totally different, because I haven't been in a school at all, but those people we are in the school together [in Australia], they already started before, they just coming to finish it – already know half of things. They're in the middle, but mine is kind of like from a zero – like let me say from a childcare or prep. You can't just take a child from prep to secondary high school to go and study – they can't do that.

As is clear in this interview excerpt, Aisha still struggles with English literacy. Having since become a single parent, she is yet to find employment in Australia.

Conversely, a number of those who had been enrolled in school in their country of origin or asylum noted that standards in subjects such as mathematics and science were higher there than in Australia. While they still had to master English and adjust to the new context, this eased their educational progression. As Sudanese-background Sarah explained:

What I learned in grade four, five, in Africa, they were teaching it here in grade nine – the science and the maths and stuff... That part wasn't hard.

It was just getting used to the new environment, new teachers and those kind of things, that was hard.

Pre-migration education thus assisted in Sarah's successful transition into a bachelor of nursing degree.

Post migration, achieving literacy in the host society language is one of the most significant challenges facing adolescent refugee migrants (Hatoss, O'Neill, and Eacersall 2012; CMYI 2006), and its importance in mediating employment trajectories is evident in the accounts of many participants. 23 year-old Serbian-background Djuro blames his inability to find a job in Australia on his limited English literacy. Comparing himself to his co-ethnic friends, he said:

...they find jobs for them, 'cause they probably know English more than me, so they can pass all these tests and stuff – for driving, for army – for all those stuff I did, I failed.

Even for those who successfully complete secondary school and enter into tertiary studies, limitations to literacy can lead to the reorientation of employment aspirations. 22 year-old Afghan man, Fahim, had done very well at school in Pakistan and hoped to follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor. Asked why he has since altered this aspiration to train instead in community health he explained: 'the language skills change me, so I have to be more on a community side now'.

Among the many facets of post-settlement educational experience and attainment mediating employment outcomes, post-secondary school programs facilitating pathways into tertiary courses were identified by a number of participants as central to their ability to pursue their career goals. While Australian education systems frequently struggle to cater to the needs of adolescent refugee migrants (Fozdar and Hartley 2013; CMYI 2006; Olliff and Couch 2005), post-secondary 'pathway' programs offered by some higher education institutions are an exception. For those who did not achieve the secondary school results required to gain entry into their preferred tertiary course, but who remained committed to pursuing their goal, these programs

have enabled them to undertake bridging qualifications to meet entry requirements. This was the path taken by 24 year-old Ethiopian man, Negasi:

I finish my year 12, but I haven't got to uni straight away... My result was a bit hard to get to what I was thinking to do. And so another way is to just get to TAFE and get another qualification there and then transfer to uni, which is another way to a bachelor.

Learning of this option through his secondary school career advisor, Negasi completed an advanced diploma and is now undertaking a bachelor degree in engineering.

It is important to note however, that with no participants in this study having yet completed their tertiary education, it remains unclear whether successful completion will lead to desired employment. As MacDonald (2011) has noted regarding young people generally, in this era of mass higher education, obtaining a qualification does not necessarily guarantee employment. Moreover, a study of refugee background men in Australia found that tertiary qualifications were not a significant predictor of employment, suggesting that factors such as discrimination may continue to mediate outcomes (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013).

## **Discussion**

Given the importance of employment for financial security, identity, social inclusion and wellbeing (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; Devadason 2006), it is crucial to gain an understanding of how adolescent refugee migrants negotiate the labour market in resettlement countries. It is in this context that this article has begun the work of exploring the factors identified by young people as impacting their employment trajectories. While the experiences of the participants in this study illustrate the diversity and complexity of work-related transitions among this cohort, they also reveal a common constellation of mediating factors that can affect employment-related decisions, experiences and outcomes. Aspirations, responsibilities, family, networks and education each

have a considerable impact, and although such factors present many barriers and vulnerabilities, they also draw attention to great strengths and opportunities.

While these factors have been addressed individually in this article, their interrelation is clear. Sarah's successful pursuit of her aspiration to study nursing must be understood in the context of her supportive family and her pre-migration education, just as Aisha's lack of education, absence of close ties in her ethnic community, and single parenthood intersect to compound her disadvantage in the labour market. Yet Negasi and Sammy demonstrate that barriers can be surmounted, with both pursuing tertiary degrees in their chosen fields despite not gaining direct entry to university. More often, however, negotiating such challenges requires a reorientation of aspirations. Thus while Arif has achieved a degree of upward mobility through promotion in his workplace, his lack of pre-migration education rendered him unable to pursue his goal of education in Australia. These differing accounts highlight the ways in which both pre- and post-migration experiences intersect to shape employment trajectories, and underscore the non-linearity of many young people's transitions from education to employment.

Moreover, as noted in the introduction, the factors explored in this article are only the most common among those identified by participants. Others that emerged in interviews, including discrimination and health, are also likely to play an important role in some people's employment trajectories, as are factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, and geographic location, identified in existing research on adult refugee migrants and marginalized youth (Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2013; Circelli and Oliver 2012; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Devadason 2006). Though the focus in many participants' accounts was on biographical factors, reflecting a broader trend among young people of narrating experiences through a discourse of individualisation (Devadason 2007; te Riele 2004; MacDonald et al. 2005), like other disadvantaged groups (c.f. Morgan and Idriss 2012; Devadason 2006), members of this cohort also demonstrate an awareness of the social and structural factors that mediate their employment trajectories. This can be seen most clearly in the accounts of participants such as Arif and Aisha whose experiences of the education system proved its inability to

support them. It is also visible in the accounts of those participants who have recalibrated or reoriented their aspirations in the face of barriers: in, for example, Nyagony's pursuit of a career that supports her role as a mother, and in Fahim's shifted aspiration from medicine to community health in light of his limited English literacy. Such accounts highlight how adolescent refugee migrants utilise 'bounded agency' (Evans 2007) in negotiating their employment trajectories, acting in response to their pasts, their imagined futures, their 'subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate' and the 'social landscapes' in which they move (92-3).

This research additionally highlights a number of areas in which policy and services could better support adolescent refugee migrants in their pursuit of satisfying and sustainable employment. This includes the need to support adolescent refugee migrants and their families in understanding education and employment structures and processes, including through facilitating bridging capital, so that young people can develop strategies to fulfill their aspirations or gain information that allows them to develop more achievable goals (MYAN 2013). It also reinforces the need for education and training institutions to recognise the pre- and post-migration factors mediating this cohort's participation and achievement – including family responsibilities, differing levels of family pressure and support, and pre-arrival education – and to assist young people in negotiating these challenges (CMYI 2006).

With participants in this study still in the process of complex transitions between education, (un)employment and caring, their long-term prospects for sustainable and satisfying employment remain unclear. What is clear, however, is that the pursuit of employment among adolescent refugee migrants involves the negotiation of a complex and dynamic set of biographical, social and structural factors, the constellation of which marks this cohort as unique from refugee adult migrants and from marginalised youth more generally. Preeminent among these factors are family and education, both of which can provide the basis for occupational achievement, but can also at times stand as impediments. Yet what emerges as the greatest strength among this cohort is their widely held

aspiration to live a good life, and more than this, the common pursuit of this aspiration in the face of significant obstacles.

**Acknowledgements:** Thank you to all of the young people who shared their ideas and experiences in this study. This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [DP120101579].

## **Works Cited**

Ager, Alastair, and Alison Strang. 2004. *Indicators of Integration: Final Report*. London: Home Office.

Anlezark, Alison. 2011a. *At Risk Youth: A Transitory State?* Canberra: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.

———. 2011b. *Young People in an Economic Downturn*. Canberra: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.

Boese, Martina, and Rosanna Scutella. 2006. *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Challenges Facing Australian Youth*. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Lawrence.

Circelli, Michelle, and Damian Oliver. 2012. *Youth Transitions: What the Research Tells Us*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

CMY. 2008. *Pathways and Transitions: Post-Compulsory Education, Work and Refugee Young People*. Melbourne: Centre for Multicultural Youth.

CMYI. 2006. *Late Arrivals: The Needs of Refugee Young People who Resettle in Later Adolescence*. Melbourne: Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues.

Colic-Peisker, Val, and Farida Tilbury. 2006. "Employment Niches for Recent Refugees: Segmented Labour Market in Twenty-first Century Australia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* no. 19 (2):203-229.



- . 2007. "Integration into the Australian Labour Market: The Experiences of Three "Visibly Different" Groups of Recently Arrived Refugees." *International Migration* no. 45 (1):59-83.
- Correa-Velez, Ignacio, Adrian Barnett, and Sandra Gifford. 2013. "Working for a Better Life: Longitudinal Evidence on the Predictors of Employment Among Recently Arrived Refugee Migrant Men Living In Australia." *International Migration*:1-17.
- Coventry, Louise, Carmel Guerra, David Mackenzie, and Sarah Pinkney. 2002. *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of Strategies to Assist Refugee Young People in Transition to Independence*. Hobart: National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.
- de Vroome, Thomas, and Frank van Tubergen. 2010. "The Employment Experience of Refugees in the Netherlands." *International Migration Review* no. 44 (2):376-403.
- Devadason, Ranji. 2006. "Class, Ethnicity and Individualisation: Young Adult Narratives of Transition in Two European Cities." *Journal of Education and Work* no. 19 (2):153-169.
- . 2007. "Constructing Coherence? Young Adults' Pursuit of Meaning Through Multiple Transitions Between Work, Education and Unemployment." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 10 (2):203-221.
- Evans, Karen. 2007. "Concepts of Bounded Agency in Education, Work, and the Personal Lives of Young Adults." *International Journal of Psychology* no. 42 (2):85-93.
- Fozdar, Farida, and Lisa Hartley. 2013. "Refugee Settlement in Australia: What We Know and Need to Know." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* no. 32 (3):23-51.
- Furlong, Andy. 2009. "Revisiting Transitional Metaphors: Reproducing Social Inequalities Under the Conditions of Late Modernity." *Journal of Education and Work* no. 22 (5):343-353.

- Gifford, Sandra M. 2013. "Reconsidering Meaning and Measurement: An Ethno-Epidemiology Study of Refugee Youth Settlement in Melbourne, Australia." In *When Culture Impacts Health: Global Lessons for Effective Health Research*, edited by C. Banwell, S. Ulijaszek and J. Dixon, 279-296. San Diego: Elsevier Science.
- Gifford, Sandra M., Christine Bakopanos, Ida Kaplan, and Ignacio Correa-Velez. 2007. "Meaning or Measurement? Researching the Social Contexts of Health and Settlement Among Newly-Arrived Refugee Youth in Melbourne, Australia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* no. 20 (3):414-440.
- Hatoss, Anikó, Shirley O'Neill, and Douglas Eacersall. 2012. "Career Choices: Linguistic and Educational Socialization of Sudanese-Background High-School Students in Australia." *Linguistics and Education* no. 23:16-30.
- Hugo, Graeme. 2011. *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*. Canberra: Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
- Jamrozik, Adam. 2005. *Social Policy in the Post-Welfare State: Australian Society in the 21st Century*. 2nd edition ed. Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.
- Khoo, Siew-Ean, and Bob Birrell. 2002. "The Progress of Young People of Migrant Origin in Australia." *People and Place* no. 10 (2):30-44.
- Lindley, Anna. 2009. "The Early-Morning Phonecall: Remittances from a Refugee Diaspora Perspective." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* no. 35 (8):1315-1334.
- MacDonald, Robert. 2011. "Youth Transitions, Unemployment and Underemployment: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?" *Journal of Sociology* no. 47 (4):427-444.
- MacDonald, Robert, Tracy Shildrick, Colin Webster, and Donald Simpson. 2005. "Growing Up in Poor Neighbourhoods: The Significance of Class and Place

- in the Extended Transitions of 'Socially Excluded' Young Adults."  
*Sociology* no. 39 (5):873-891.
- Matthews, Julie. 2008. "Schooling and Settlement: Refugee Education in Australia." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* no. 18 (1):31-45.
- McMichael, Celia. 2013. "Unplanned But Not Unwanted? Teen Pregnancy and Parenthood Among Young People with Refugee Backgrounds." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 16 (5):663-678.
- McMichael, Celia, Sandra M. Gifford, and Ignacio Correa-Velez. 2011. "Negotiating Family, Navigating Resettlement: Family Connectedness Amongst Resettled Youth with Refugee Backgrounds Living in Melbourne, Australia." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 14 (2):179-195.
- Morgan, George, and Sherene Idriss. 2012. "'Corsages on their Parents' Jackets': Employment and Aspiration Among Arabic-Speaking Youth in Western Sydney." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 15 (7):929-943.
- MYAN. 2013. Discussion Paper: Employment Services – Building on Success. Submission to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Melbourne: Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network.
- Olliff, Louise, and Jen Couch. 2005. "Pathways and Pitfalls: The Journey of Refugee Young People in and around the Education System in Greater Dandenong, Victoria." *Youth Studies Australia* no. 24 (3):42-46.
- Pech, J., A. McNevin, and L. Nelms. 2009. Young People with Poor Labour Force Attachment: A Survey of Concepts, Data and Previous Research. Melbourne: Australian Fair Pay Commission.
- Refugee Council of Australia. 2010. Economic, Civic and Social Contributions of Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants: A Literature Review. Sydney: Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
- Semo, Ronnie. 2011. Social Capital and Young People. Canberra: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.

- Stevenson, Jacqueline, and John Willott. 2007. "The Aspiration and Access to Higher Education of Teenage Refugees in the UK." *Compare* no. 37 (5):671-687.
- te Riele, Kitty. 2004. "Youth Transition in Australia: Challenging Assumptions of Linearity and Choice." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 7 (7):243-257.
- Torezani, Silvia, Val Colic-Peisker, and Farida Fozdar. 2008. "Looking for a 'Missing Link': Formal Employment Services and Social Networks in Refugees' Job Search." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* no. 29 (2):135-152.
- Wilkinson, Lori. 2002. "Factors Influencing the Academic Success of Refugee Youth in Canada." *Journal of Youth Studies* no. 5 (2):173-193.
- . 2008. "Labour Market Transitions of Immigrant-Born, Refugee-Born, and Canadian-Born Youth." *Canadian Review of Sociology - Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* no. 45 (2):151-176.
- Willott, John, and Jacqueline Stevenson. 2013. "Attitudes to Employment of Professionally Qualified Refugees in the United Kingdom." *International Migration* no. 51 (5):120-132.

---

<sup>1</sup> TAFE (Technical and Further Education) is a form of tertiary education available throughout Australia which specialises in providing nationally recognised qualifications in vocational education and training.

---